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ABSTRACT

A study evaluated an alternative seminar and major paper approach to the traditional doctoral program comprehensive examination at Pepperdine University (California). The pilot project was conducted over a period of 6 trimesters and involved 28 students who had already completed their course work. Students were also involved in the development of the evaluation criteria, which was then approved by the faculty. The approach followed was to require that students participated in a weekly seminar which focused on the development of a 30-50 page report addressing a real problem and including a plan or proposal to address that topic. The paper was then reviewed by three faculty members without knowledge of the student's identity. The student later made an oral defense of his/her paper before the same faculty committee. Grades were composed of honors, pass, marginal pass, or fail. Post-program evaluation indicated that the students and faculty were overwhelmingly supportive of the seminar and paper approach. The approach was positively received by both students and faculty and appeared to have shortened the time for dissertation completion and was approved by the faculty to become an alternative to the classical comprehensive exams. (GLR)

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE
COMPREHENSIVE SEMINAR PILOT PROGRAM

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AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO THE CLASSICAL COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Over 10 years ago, the faculty at the Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Pepperdine University, were asked to vote on a proposed change in the comprehensive examination process. For various reasons the "change" was not approved. During the ensuing 8 years, several faculty members, along with strong support from graduates and current students in the Institutional Management doctoral program, developed an option to the classical comprehensive exams. Students and many faculty referred to the classical comps as a "regurgitation" of exams already taken during course work. As a consequence of the efforts to design a changed approach, a two pilot project was introduced in September 1990.

METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 1990 28 students, many coming out of the woodwork, participated in the initial pilot offering. The title of comprehensive examinations was changed to Comprehensive Seminar and two faculty members, one at each of two Pepperdine facilities, served as facilitator/mentors. The students participating at each site were involved in the development of the evaluation criteria, which was then approved by the faculty. The approach followed was to require that each student select a problem/topic or issue which would require the development of a plan or proposal to address that topic. A paper of 50 pages or less was to be developed, synthesizing the doctoral coursework. This paper was reviewed by three faculty without knowledge of the student's identity. The student later made an oral defense of his/her paper before the same faculty committee. Grades were honors, pass, marginal pass, or fail. The pilot project was conducted for six trimesters.

CONCLUSIONS

Students and faculty overwhelmingly supported the seminar approach. Students reacted strongly in two areas: the approach was vastly superior to the classical approach; and, it was considerably harder, but worth it. This approach also appears to have shortened the time for dissertation completion. The pilot program has been approved by faculty and will become an alternative to the classical comprehensive exams in the next Pepperdine Catalog.

1 Background

The issue of whether or not comprehensive examinations accomplish their purpose has been debated for years throughout the academic community. Pepperdine's Graduate School of Education and Psychology (GSEP) is no exception.

In July of 1982, a proposal, prepared by two full-time faculty members, for an alternative approach to the comprehensive examinations was prepared and submitted for faculty consideration. This recommendation followed an evaluation of the doctoral program in institutional management (referred to as the EDIM program) by an independent consultant, who recommended that alternative approaches be considered in view of the "unique nature of the program and its youthfulness." Quoting from the faculty proposal:

"This process permits greater appreciation of course work in a less anxiety-provoking climate. Students will be expected to utilize skills and knowledge obtained from class work and apply them to a problem situation. This approach also enables close monitoring of student progress. Areas of weakness would be identified early in the weekly seminar and rectified by faculty assistance."

In the fall of 1982, at the Pepperdine campus on Vermont Avenue in Los Angeles, this proposal was submitted for faculty vote and was defeated. No further action was taken on this proposal until 1988 when expressions from students (through the EDIM Student Advisory Committee) and faculty (during Ed faculty meetings) revived the issue of identifying other approaches to the comprehensive examination process.

For the ensuing academic year, discussions were held, both formally and informally, and two alternative approaches were considered. One involved a Charette-type environment and the other, patterned after the 1982 proposal, called for weekly seminar-type sessions with a paper and its oral defense being the final products. The focus of the seminar involved preparing a report that addressed a real problem. The 30 -50 page report described a solution or a set of strategies to reach a solution to the problem. Students were expected to integrate and apply their doctoral coursework to the solution of the identified problem. The oral defense of the report offered faculty the opportunity to seek clarification of solution strategies, address possible roadblocks to implementation, and ask "What if?" questions of the student. By faculty vote, both alternatives were considered viable.

The second approach, for various reasons, was selected as an

initial pilot program and was designated to commence in the fall of 1990.

2 Narrative Description of Initial (Fall 1990) Process

Twenty eight students who had completed their course work expressed an interest in participating in this first pilot for the alternative approach to the comprehensive examinations. For the balance of this paper, this approach will be referred to as the Comprehensive Seminar.

Of the initial 28 students, 15 enrolled at Pepperdine University Plaza in Culver City and 13 at the Orange County Center adjacent to the John Wayne Airport. Two students subsequently dropped from the Orange County group.

A copy of the initial handout for the fall of 1990 appears as Appendix A to this paper. Although modifications were made during the two year pilot term, the major change in conduct of the pilot was that in the fall of 1990 the students were asked to develop the criteria against which their papers and oral defense would be evaluated. This process took the first three weeks of the trimester, but did result in the criteria forms. Slight modifications were made to these two forms (written and oral materials) during the first three trimesters of the pilot Comprehensive Seminar program.

3 Narrative Description of Spring 1992 Process

During the final trimester of the pilot Comprehensive Seminar program, 10 students were enrolled at the Orange County Center. A copy of the initial handout describing the course, its objectives, schedule and additional notes appears as Appendix B.

Over the six trimesters of conducting the Comprehensive Seminar pilot, the two seminar leaders developed hints and suggestions for the students.

Briefly, the following describes the steps for the Comprehensive Seminar pilot during the spring trimester of 1992:

1. During the first few weeks, students working with the seminar leader and other students, define a problem, issue, or dilemma which will serve as the topic for the Comprehensive Seminar. NOTE: for some students this is quite difficult. During the spring trimester, one student did not successfully identify his/her topic until the sixth week of the seminar. The topic needs to have sufficient breadth to permit

consideration of all coursework but also must be

sufficiently narrow that a solution can be reached.

2. Once the topic has been identified, the students commence preparation of their paper which is a plan or a proposal (not chapters 1, 2, and 3 of a dissertation proposal). They are instructed to assume the role of a decision-maker in the organization and to prepare this plan to be presented to a group of persons (perhaps board of trustees or regents). This plan is to synthesize the course work taken during the EDIM program. This is the second difficult time for the students. Many of them still think of their courses in neat boxes and have trouble tying the content together into a cohesive document.
3. There are key milestones for student submissions for review by the seminar leader. Students adhere to these timelines differently. For example, some students will not submit their paper until they are almost completed, thereby providing little time for the seminar leader to make constructive criticisms.
4. Two weeks before the oral defense of the paper, students submit their paper for faculty review. This review is conducted without an identification of the student's name. Clearly, some topics selected by students make it easy to identify whose paper is being reviewed. Faculty have been identified for the three person review committees by the staff Program Coordinator with every effort being made to assure that at least one faculty member who has taught the student is on the committee. During this two week period, students are subjected to mock orals before their seminar leader and fellow students.
5. Three days before the oral defense of the papers (now scheduled for the next to last Thursday and/or Friday of the trimester) students are aware of who is on their committee and faculty are aware, formally, of whose paper has been reviewed.
6. Faculty evaluations are given to the Program Coordinator and placed in a sealed envelope. At the time of the oral defense, the envelope is given to the chair of the committee. The envelope remains sealed until the orals are completed and the oral evaluation submitted to the chair by each committee member. At that time, the committee chair examines both the paper evaluations and the oral evaluations.
7. If there is "harmony" on the part of the committee

members, then a grade of honors, pass, marginal pass, or fail is reported following all oral defenses. A marginal evaluation suggests a need for some modification to the submitted paper and generally is followed by giving an "IP" (In Progress) grade rather than a "P" (Pass) grade. Since the start of the Comprehensive Seminar pilot program there have been four failures and five honors, with 60 students being involved over the two year period.

As the trimester progresses, faculty and students receive additional documentation:

1. For the faculty, the sequence of events (just a reminder)
2. For the faculty, conduct of the orals (some observations as faculty prepare for the orals)
3. Some instructions for the Chair
4. Requirements for submission of materials by the students.

4 Summary of Evaluations:

Following completion of their orals, each student and faculty member is asked to complete evaluation forms. Faculty provide an overall evaluation while the students evaluate the Comprehensive Seminar pilot, as well as the orals. On each form, the following four items appear:

1. I liked
2. Next time
3. My overall rating of the process is
4. I will suggest to future candidates that

Following are selected observations from the student and faculty comments. In reviewing these detailed comments, it is important to note that suggestions made by both students and faculty, where possible, were incorporated into the process.

4.1. Faculty

1. I liked:

Faculty interaction.
Meeting students, talking with colleagues.
A chance to probe the thinking of our students.

2. Next time:

Find a method to reduce anxiety.
Have students start to write papers sooner.
Place more emphasis on quality of written report.
Consider a simulation process.
Relate better to Institutional Management.
Give us clearer criteria on evaluating papers and orals.
Let's work on rating sheets.

3. My overall rating of the process is:

Most comments are great, excellent, good, very good.

4. I will suggest to future candidates that:

They select a broad enough problem to incorporate course work.
They practice synthesis throughout course work.
They improve their writing skills.
They begin thinking about the synthesis process before the Comprehensive Seminar.

4.2. Students, Pilot

1. I liked

The feed back from seminar leaders.
The interaction with the group.
The entire process.
Opportunity to review and synthesize course materials.
The mock orals process.

2. Next time

Start projects earlier.
Have faculty members visit seminar and discuss critical issues.
More direction/earlier critiques.

3. My overall rating of the process is

Reactions were positive, with comments such as "time consuming, but relevant," Now I appreciate the process," and "outstanding."

4. I will suggest to future candidates that

Plan scenarios before Comprehensive Seminar starts.
They opt for the process.
They participate in this model.

4.3. Students, Orals

1. I liked

Panel's comments were very good.
Positive tone set by panel.
Open, relaxed atmosphere of faculty.
The types of questions asked and the way follow-up questions were asked for clarification.

2. Next time

Have at least two committee members know the student.
Continue the "mock orals"
Perhaps allow candidate to select one committee member.
Place more emphasis on preparation for the orals.
Some of us felt we were being raked over the coals at the orals.
Please, God, don't let there be a next time.

3. My overall rating of the process is

Wow! A wonderful learning experience.
Ratings were all high: good, very good, excellent, A+.

4. I will suggest to future candidates that

Be relaxed and prepared.
Begin early, keep on schedule, and develop an overall plan.
Keep an accurate system of class notes.

5 Observations by the Seminar Leaders

1. Since the Comprehensive Seminar appears to be positively accepted by both faculty and students, it should be adopted as an option to the classical comprehensive examinations. It was in the late Spring of 1992 and becomes a catalog entry during the 1993-94 academic year.
2. Although an inter-rater reliability assessment was done during one trimester, it appears that faculty are rating students from differing perspectives. Therefore, a more specific set of evaluation criteria should be developed, using the forms currently in use as the starting point. What, for example, differentiates an honors paper from a pass paper?
3. More faculty need to be involved throughout the process, both in conducting the seminars and in the evaluation of the papers and oral defenses.
4. Although weekly seminar sessions were held during the pilot, it may be appropriate to consider sessions which are longer but held less frequently. This is being

tested during the current, fall 1992, trimester.

5. Consideration needs to be given to how we should be dealing with the marginal student who cannot write well or develop a logical approach. How, for example, should we be handling the student rated as "marginal" by the faculty committee.
6. Both seminar leaders consider the load generated by this approach considerably greater than an equivalent two unit course, particularly when there are more than seven or eight students in the seminar. *An adequate compensation schedule must be developed.*
7. Time is a critical element. The expectation of reaching a potential solution to a real-world problem and preparing a report may take more than the 12 weeks. Many students experience difficulty in synthesizing and applying their course work over this short time period.
8. Faculty are becoming more aware of the content of each other's courses by reading the papers and participating in the orals. It is unusual for many faculty members to sit together as a team to "discuss" the applications to real-world problems of doctoral coursework with a student.
9. The need for individual professors to alter their teaching styles and model application of theory to practice is becoming very apparent. Questions now arise in post-oral discussions regarding the "how" and "what" of the doctoral coursework.
10. This approach helps students in the preparation of their dissertations. Some students continue with the same topic and complete a research study related to some identified aspect of the comprehensive report. Others become more skilled during the oral defense of their solution, thereby assisting them greatly with the subsequent oral defenses at the dissertation stage.